What to look for in a group facilitator

Sandor P. Schuman

Filling this role with the right person can make decision making and problem solving go more smoothly.

Your group -- executive team, task force, working group, interagency committee, commission, or expert panel -- faces a complex decision in which there are multiple issues and diverse perspectives. You believe the group will be more likely to succeed if there is one person who can help the members work together to address the problem at hand. Now, how do you go about selecting this facilitator?

The type of facilitation needed in this case is very different from that used in training, informational meetings, and other settings. In training situations, for example, the group has clear, predetermined goals and objectives, deals with a well-defined subject, and rarely encounters conflict. In contrast, problem-solving groups determine their own goals and objectives, define the nature and scope of the subject matter, and frequently encounter conflict which, if not handled constructively, can lead to failure.

What special skills are required to facilitate these groups? How can you select a facilitator who will meet your group's needs and produce effective results? Four basic capabilities should be sought in a facilitator:

1. He or she should be able to anticipate, soup-to-nuts, the complete problem-solving and decision-making process.
2. He or she should use procedures that support both the group's social and cognitive processes.
3. He or she should remain neutral regarding content issues and values.
4. He or she should respect the group's need to understand and learn from the problem solving process.

A Soup-to-Nuts Approach to Meeting Strategies

A facilitator should take a strategic view of the group's work. He or she should understand the needs of the group and the requirements of the tasks and lay out an appropriate strategy in advance. Like a chessmaster, an experienced facilitator looks several steps ahead in the problem-solving process. Rather than thinking in terms of a single, stand-alone meeting, the facilitator should see the work of the group as a larger, integrated process that is punctuated by meetings. What happens between meetings can be just as important as the work done during meetings.

The facilitator might first ask the group to describe the problem, which could be, for example, "Over the last two years, many of our users have made suggestions for improvements to our information systems. We haven’t been able to respond until recently, and now we have to set some clear priorities. Users have to understand that we are still operating with limited funds and that we won’t be able to implement all the improvements they request."

After some consideration and discussion, the facilitator should be able to depict a complete scenario that describes how the group might proceed through various phases to solve the problem and reach a decision. He or she might propose the following: "How does this sound? We could start by getting the users together to identify each of the projects they would like to pursue. We’d ask them to think about this individually and then collect their ideas, one at a time, to build a

complete list on a flip chart. We could ask them to organize related projects in clusters, and assign each cluster to a small group. Each small group would examine its cluster, break larger efforts into smaller, more manageable projects, and arrange the projects in order of priority. Then we could ask the users to evaluate the relative benefit -- albeit highly subjective -- of each package. We could rely on the systems specialists to make rough estimates of the relative costs. Then we'd have a basis for sorting the list of proposals according to their benefit-cost ratio."

Although a detailed plan is valuable, versatility and flexibility are also important. A facilitator should be able to describe alternative scenarios or suggest how the agenda might vary depending on how things actually work out at each stage. An experienced facilitator selects from what Marshall Scott Poole, a communications researcher at the University of Minnesota, calls a "procedural salad bar" to assemble a process appropriate to the group's needs. One should avoid a facilitator who always serves up a house salad, relying on a method that does not change regardless of the particular situation that the group faces. A facilitator with such a limited repertoire brings to mind the saying, "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

Helping the Group Think and Talk at the Same Time

The work of decision-making groups involves both social and cognitive processes, according James Ward and Peter Reingen, professors of marketing at Arizona State University. Group members communicate and interact (which involves a social process) so that they can address content issues (which involves a cognitive process). The combination of these two processes creates a shared understanding of the problem among the group, which forms the basis for a consensus solution and, in turn, enables effective implementation and follow-up. Facilitators should be conscious of their twofold task; they should be able to illustrate procedures that will help the group think about the problem and, at the same time, help the group interact effectively.

Consider a group situation in which the discussion becomes heated and a number of people are talking at once. A facilitator might intervene with the following: *"Let's listen to what each person has to say, one at a time. We'll work our way around the table and give everyone the opportunity to speak. Mary, would you like to start?"* This is an intervention in the social process that regulates how people interact, but it does not, by itself, intervene in the cognitive process.

To address the cognitive process, the facilitator might add, "As each person speaks I will summarize on the flip chart the key issue or concern that he or she is presenting. I'd like you to tell me exactly how to word your issue. When we have a complete list of issues we'll be able to look for shared concerns and we'll be in a better position to evaluate their role and importance." A facilitator can aid the cognitive process by recording and structuring information. Otherwise, the group provides information in an invisible and unmanageable stream.

Process Leadership but Content Neutrality

Facilitators assume a position of responsibility that strongly influences the group. While facilitators should assume responsibility for the group process (after all, they are placed in this role because of their process expertise) they should not attempt to apply content expertise.

There are two reasons why this differentiation is important. First, thinking about the problem is a demanding, full-time job. It is too much to expect group members to think hard about the problem and at the same time observe the group's behavior and steer the process. The facilitator provides a great service to the group by shouldering this burden. Likewise, it is too much to ask that the facilitator attend to process issues and, at the same time, work on solving the problem.

Second, if the facilitator were to step over the line and try to contribute to or influence the group's decision, he or she would likely be seen as taking sides. You might think of this as the "dark-side" of facilitation. Although inexperienced facilitators might be tempted to offer content knowledge or opinion, this can undermine their ability to aid the group as a whole. Larry and Maryann Phillips, facilitators in the United Kingdom, suggest that facilitators address content issues by handing them back in changed form. They should carefully listen to what group members say and then feed this back in a form that summarizes, reorganizes, or integrates information to provide insights. But facilitators should not buy into or advocate the results of their analysis. Facilitators should be neutral -- they should let group members examine their values, assumptions, and choices, never suggesting or advocating what they should be.

Say, for example, that an argument has erupted regarding wilderness preservation: "There isn't a single resident in this area who supports wilderness!" proclaims one individual. Another responds, "I know hundreds of people who support wilderness preservation!" The first, indignant, retorts, "I don't believe you even *know* a hundred people!" Before the discord can escalate further, the facilitator steps in: "One moment, please. First, I would like to make sure we all understand what people mean by "wilderness." Let's hear the views of some other people, and let's be very clear about what we mean. John, could you describe exactly what you mean when you use the term wilderness?" In this case, the facilitator did not engage in the content discussion by offering an opinion about who is in favor of wilderness preservation, or by giving a definition of wilderness. Rather, the facilitator exercised process leadership by moving the discussion away from the antagonists, inviting another individual into the discussion, and asking a pointed question to examine underlying assumptions about the meaning of terminology.

If the desire of your group is to gain additional content expertise, hire a substantive expert. But remember: do not saddle him or her with the additional chore of facilitating the group process.

Respect for the Group

For group members to buy into the results, they also have to buy into the rules and procedures of the process. Michael Harmon, a professor of public affairs, explains that these rules and procedures are understood in moral terms. Imagine how members might feel if, as they follow a facilitator's instructions, they thought the wool was being pulled over their eyes. They might well respond with anger akin to moral indignation.

Good facilitators are keenly aware that they are intervening in basic functions that are dearly valued, such as how individuals communicate, process and make sense of information, and reach decisions. Because of this, it is critical that the group understand what the facilitator is doing. In other words, the procedures used by the facilitator should be transparent -- the members should be able to see right through the rules to understand their underlying intent and how they are applied.

Sometimes, however, a facilitator might decide that the problem is extremely difficult and calls for a problem-solving method that is necessarily complex -- one that can capture the complications and convolutions of the problem and make it manageable. Such methods are powerful, but they are not always easy to explain or understand. Complex methods and procedures can be overwhelming to group members being exposed to them for the first time. They often react with suspicion, especially if they distrust other participants or question the facilitator's neutrality on substantive issues. It is unreasonable to expect people to play for keeps when they do not understand the rules and feel they cannot formulate a strategy.

Imagine that a group has created an extensive list of alternative courses of action. The facilitator distributes to each participant a strip of stickers, such as colored dots. He or she says, "I'd like each of you to come forward, examine the options written on the charts, and pick the five options you would most like to pursue. Place one sticker on each of the five most promising options." One of the group members protests: "I don't understand where we're headed. Is this going to narrow down the list? Are we going to drop from consideration all but the top five alternatives? What about the ones that are interrelated? What about the more complicated ones that won't get many votes because no one understands them?" In a case like this, the facilitator should make clear what are the implications of this step, and where the process is headed.

In using complex methods, the facilitator should provide an overview of the method, touching briefly on the steps of the procedure. The facilitator might also take the group through a trial run of the procedure to make sure everyone understands it. The goal should be that each person understands the process -- if not beforehand, then at least before it concludes. The facilitator must meet the group's need to understand the process.

Selecting a facilitator for your group

Facilitating structured meetings is a recent innovation in the history of problem solving, conflict resolution, and decision making. While facilitation's value has been clearly documented, groups might be hesitant because they are not sure what facilitation is or what to look for when selecting a facilitator. These guidelines can help you select a facilitator who will meet your needs and establish an effective working relationship with your group.

Facilitation works best when the facilitator:

- Takes a strategic and comprehensive view of the problem-solving and decision-making processes and selects, from a broad array, the specific methods that match the group's needs and the tasks at hand
- Supports the group's social and cognitive processes, freeing the group members to focus their attention on substantive issues,
- Is trusted by all group members as a neutral party who has no biases or vested interest in the outcome
- Helps the group understand the techniques being used and enables the group to improve its own problem-solving processes.

Do You Need an Outside Facilitator?

While a group member can effectively perform the role of facilitator in many situations, it is often preferable to use a facilitator who is not a group member. This might best be an in-house facilitator who is not associated with the group's work; in some cases it is valuable to hire an independent facilitator. Determining the need for an outside facilitator can be aided by examining the group's condition using the following criteria.

1. Distrust or bias

In situations where distrust or bias is apparent or suspected, groups should make use of an un-biased outsider to facilitate (and perhaps convene) the group.

The individual whose job is to manage the process -- typically the chairperson or team leader -- has an enormous influence on the process and, consequently, the outcome. This person's choice of participants, analytical methods, and methods of social interaction influences the group effort at

a fundamental level. Because of this, group members might view this leader as biased -- steering the process in some way to promote his or her own agenda. True or not, this perception can greatly hinder the process.

interpersonal trust									suspicion
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2. Intimidation

The presence of an outside facilitator can encourage the participation of individuals who might otherwise feel intimidated.

Where participants are of disparate educational, social or economic status; are at different hierarchical levels; or are in other types of control relationships (such as purchaser-supplier or client-provider) some group members might feel intimidated and not participate. The presence of a facilitator can give participants someone of neutral status to whom they can direct their comments without fear. The facilitator is in a legitimate position to elicit information from the group as a whole, as well as from specific individuals who are not forthcoming. In particularly tense circumstances, the facilitator might choose to elicit information anonymously.

low status differential									high status differential
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

3. Rivalry

Rivalries between individuals and organizations can be mitigated by the presence of an outside facilitator.

Participants are typically reluctant to reveal personal rivalries or attack one another in the presence of an outsider. (Perhaps they realize that their claims might not appear valid to an outsider, and so do not even raise them. Participants are often surprised at how polite they are to each other.) But, if rivalries do surface, a facilitator can determine if they are relevant to the task at hand. If they are not, the facilitator will refocus the group on its stated purpose. If they are relevant, the facilitator will ask the group to understand them as part of the the issues to be addressed.

low competition									high competition
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4. Problem definition

If the problem is poorly defined, or defined differently by multiple parties, an unbiased listener and analyst can help to construct an integrated, shared understanding of the problem.

When a group represents disparate views, members are often more concerned with having their point of view understood by others, than understanding others' views. An unbiased party, one who does not advocate any particular position and whose role is to listen to, analyze, and integrate everyone's views, is a valuable asset to such a group.

well defined, held in common									poorly or differently defined
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

5. Human limits

Bringing in a facilitator to lead the group process lets members focus on the problem at hand, which can lead to better results.

In difficult situations, working with the breadth of issues and volumes of important information is demanding enough; it is too much to expect anyone to also manage the processes that come into play in a meeting. Human cognitive capabilities are not great enough. Running a meeting, and participating in a meeting, are each sufficiently demanding to warrant having the facilitator focus on the former, and the group on the latter.

low demands									high demands
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

6. Complexity or novelty

In a complex or novel situation, a process expert can help the group do a better job of working together intellectually to solve the problem.

Process expertise requires judgment, practical skills, and in-depth knowledge of problem solving and decision making. According to David Korten, "The capacity to manage social learning is itself a form of social knowledge." Most groups have developed their own expertise for addressing ordinary problems or making repeat decisions. When approaching an unusual situation, however, a group can benefit from an expert for whom this particular problem-solving situation is familiar.

simple or familiar situation									complex or unfamiliar situation
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

7. Timeliness

If a timely decision is required, as in a crisis situation, the use of a facilitator can speed the group's work.

If participants have to make process decisions as a group, they take valuable time away from addressing substantive issues. Unlike parliamentary procedure, for which there are prescribed rules which address nearly every procedural issue that a decision-making group can encounter, there is no rule book for collaboration. Instead of making up the rules as they go along, groups can adopt the rules of a process expert. The expert acts as a group process parliamentarian -- choosing which rules to apply, explaining them as needed, and steering the group through the process.

no rush									pressure to solve quickly
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

8. Cost

A facilitator can help the group reduce the cost of meeting -- a significant barrier to collaboration.

Participants might be reluctant to attend meetings because of competing demands on their time, doubts about the amount of progress they will be able to make, or travel costs. By making each meeting more efficient and productive, a facilitator can reduce the overall cost in terms of participants' time. Because more is accomplished at each meeting, the total number of meetings might be reduced.

easy to get together									difficult to get together
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

A higher score suggests that

- the role of facilitator should be clearly differentiated from that of participant an
- an outside, **unbiased** facilitator should be used.